



WildPlay TOOLKIT

A guide for
setting up a
wild play space

Our Past, Our Future
Working together for the New Forest



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Section One: Practicalities



What is wild play?

Wild play is essentially playing outside in a natural environment. This could include building dens, jumping in puddles, hunting for mini-beasts, making mud pies and clambering over logs or fallen trees. Wild play is all these and much, much more! Opportunities for self-directed, free play within nature offer countless benefits to children and often create standout childhood memories. Think back to your own childhood; what are your best play memories?

Children today have significantly fewer opportunities for wild play than the generations before them, typically spending increased amounts of time playing within the home environment and utilising digital technology and social media (Moss, 2012).

A study carried out by Natural England (2006) found that only 10% of children play in natural spaces today, compared with 40% of adults when they were young. A key part of the wild play project is developing natural play spaces within or near New Forest communities, equipped with low-key, natural resources and loose parts such as large logs for balancing and climbing, brash for den building, log circles and willow tunnels. These community-based sites are intended to help enable local children to access opportunities for wild play on a regular basis.

There is a focus within wild play on children's interactions with natural spaces and the different elements within them. This helps to promote a freedom of play which supports a wider range of play types than the more prescriptive traditional play areas which rely on fixed play equipment such as swings and slides. In addition to an increased freedom within play, playing outside in a natural environment has also been shown to provide numerous benefits to the health of children.

Who is this toolkit for?

This toolkit is for parish councils, groups, organisations and individuals who would like to develop the wild play opportunities within their community. The toolkit will help to guide you through the process of setting up a wild play site or event, from the very first steps through to ideas for your project and ongoing tasks to be aware of. Whilst the toolkit is designed to guide you through your wild play journey, each section can also be referred to individually depending on what you need. It will also direct you to other publications or resources that may be of use.

The benefits of wild play

The benefits of wild play are seemingly endless, supporting both the physical and mental health of children, as well as promoting child development and social inclusion. Wild play is increasingly being recognised as an essential part of childhood. In a society where there is an increasing obesity epidemic and one in ten children and young people experience a diagnosable mental health disorder, children are also spending significantly less time in nature than any generation before them.



Health

Whilst some benefits are more obvious, such as increased physical activity helping to address childhood obesity, others are perhaps less apparent.

There is strong evidence that suggests nature is a major motivator for exercise and also that time spent in the outdoors has the strongest

correlation to physical activity, especially amongst pre-school children (RSPB 2010).

Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) often experience lower levels of muscle tone, balance and strength, therefore giving them opportunities to participate in physical activity will exercise their muscles and encourage gross and fine motor skills (Attwood, 2007). Just being outside, gives them the freedom to work off their energy and frustration which can help them to become calmer; this can be said for all children.

Mental health has become an increasing issue for children and young people over recent years. Time spent playing out in wild places has been shown to help to reduce levels of anxiety and depression in children, as well as promoting healthy sleep patterns. A child's general sense of self-worth increases the more time they spend out in nature and the negative impact of stressful life events is reduced (RSPB 2010).

These are just a few of the potential health benefits of wild play. Time spent playing among nature can also help reduce levels of diabetes, heart disease and many other health conditions.

Child development

Wild play is less prescriptive than traditional, fixed play spaces with structures such as swings and slides. As such, it also holds the potential to support a much wider range of developmental domains, including gross and fine motor skill, imagination and creativity, language and general cognitive development. The freedom experienced within wild play helps children to develop a sense of independence and autonomy, increases their levels of concentration, self-esteem and self-discipline as well as holding the potential to reduce the presence of bullying.

The opportunity to experience and take on an appropriate level of risk and challenge within wild play enables children to develop a practical sense of risk and how to assess and manage it, whilst balancing simultaneous feelings of excitement and fear. Without such experiences of risk during childhood, they will have no sense of how to deal with risk later in on in the adult world (Play England, 2012).



Fostering social inclusion

"If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder... he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in."
(Carson, 1965)

Wild play not only holds the potential to benefit the children directly involved in play, but also the wider communities in which they live. Engaging in wild play helps to increase a child's social interactions and fosters the presence of more positive feelings about their peers.

The non-prescriptive nature of wild play enables children/young people of all ages to either play together or alongside one another. The ability to appeal to all age groups helps to encourage maximum usage of a wild play site. During the school day, the space can be used by toddlers and young children of pre-school age; after school the space is more likely to be used by older children and teenagers.

Secure connections to people and places within their community help develop a child's sense of self-esteem and resilience, attributes which are significant for children moving into young adulthood. Where wild play is locally based, owned and led by the community, these social benefits extend further to the families who play together and to those who help establish, maintain and run the wild play spaces. It is also widely acknowledged that parents extend their social networks through connections made at community play spaces.

Caring for and protecting the environment

‘No one will protect what they don’t care about and no one will care about what they have never experienced.’

(David Attenborough, 2010)

Wild play provides endless opportunities for engagement and connection with the natural environment and can instil a sense of peace and being at one with the world. It is such experiences and connections which can lead to a desire to protect and conserve the natural environment in adulthood.

Children have an instinctive interest in, and attachment to, the natural environment. However, this is an instinct that needs to be nurtured through positive early experiences. A lack of natural play during childhood can even result in an irrational aversion to nature, children who have anxious parents, or those who did not independently visit woodlands were the least likely to enjoy nature later in life (Bird 2007).



Education

Children who have contact with nature have been seen to experience improvements in their learning. Described by child psychologist, Aric Sigman as the ‘Countryside effect,’ he observed that children knew and understood more, felt and behaved better, worked more cooperatively and were physically healthier as a result of being within a natural environment (Moss 2012).

5 to 10% of children in the UK are affected by Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Research has shown that experiencing activities outdoors, within nature, can improve the concentration levels of a child with ADHD by 30% when compared to an outdoor, urban environment and a huge threefold improvement over indoor activities. These increased concentration levels have also been shown to reach beyond the time spent in nature, extending back into the home and classroom (Taylor, et al 1991).

Getting started

When thinking about developing a wild play site, it is likely that you already have a piece of land in mind for your project. If not, then this should be one of your starting points. Whether you have a site in mind or not, points to consider are:

- How is the site currently used? How do the current users feel about a wild play site?
- Is the site easily accessible to the community? What about buggies and wheelchairs?
- Can the site be accessed by foot or is there space for parking?
- Is there already open access to the site or would this need to be arranged?
- Are there children in the local area looking for somewhere to play?
- Are the landowners in agreement with the wild play space?
- Who currently manages the site? This could be a different organisation to the landowner. Ownership of land can be discovered by visiting the government website: www.gov.uk/government/organisations/land-registry.
- What do any neighbours think of the planned wild play space?



- Is the site in an appropriate location, e.g. away from busy roads and other major hazards?
- Are there any environmental considerations to be aware of?

Once the use of a site for wild play has been agreed by all relevant parties, you can start to think about the details of the project and how it may progress.

Thinking about the site

Every site will be unique and have its own characteristics and it is worth taking these into consideration from the beginning. It may be that there are features that are already used for play that could be incorporated into the design of the site.

Alternatively, there may be potential conflicts or issues in the area such as dog walking which need to be considered early on in the process.

Talking to people who know the site well can be invaluable to the planning process, as they may be aware of things that are not initially obvious. They can also help to advise you on any preparatory work that may need to be completed. Consulting with local experts can also help to ensure that there is nothing environmentally sensitive in the area that could be impacted. They should also be able to help with carrying out tree safety surveys and any associated works across the site.

As each wild play site will be different, the strategy that you adopt to conserve and improve the wildlife value of the space should be specifically tailored to your site. However there are some guiding principles that can help.

Firstly, try to find out what is already present on your site; from there you can work out how to maintain and encourage wildlife, whilst also providing an amazing wild play space. Contacting local wildlife organisations



can be invaluable for this. Groups to consider might include:

- The National Park Authority
- Your local Wildlife Trust
- The local authority countryside service
- Local voluntary wildlife groups

Even if these organisations are unable to help you directly, hopefully they should be able to point you in the direction of somebody who can.

Insurance

However well planned a play space is, accidents happen and as such, it is crucial that an appropriate level of insurance is in place. If the site is already an open access site, it is likely that the landowner will have a level of public liability insurance in place. It is important to check with the provider what this covers and if it needs expanding to include the wild play site.

Other parties involved in the project may also need to have their own insurance in place depending on their role

in the project; it is always worth seeking professional advice to make sure that there is an appropriate level of cover. There is a wide range of insurance options available, so take your time to do your research and perhaps speak to other groups involved in managing play spaces in your area.

Community

Engaging the local community is vital to the success of any wild play project, not only is it where the children live who are likely to use the site, but it is also a potential source of volunteers for the project. Without the support of the local community, it may be very difficult to get your project off the ground. Raising awareness of the project and getting the community involved from the start helps to provide them with a sense of ownership of the site and can help promote the longevity of the project.

Play England's resource Creating Playful Communities (2011) is a great starting point for community engagement.

Volunteers

Bringing together people and agencies from within the community to work on your wild play project can have a huge impact on its achievability, creativity and longevity. It is worth dedicating time to recruiting some volunteers to help and there are lots of potential avenues to consider approaching:

- Community members, both adults and children
- Schools including, teachers, parents and pupils
- Community groups such as early years, youth, conservation and special interest
- Organisations such as local authorities, parish councils and housing associations

Once you have put your group together, utilising people's individual skills and interests for fun, achievable tasks will help to keep them engaged in the project, making the project more sustainable in the long run. Remember anyone that will be working directly with children (including volunteers) may need to have a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check to ensure that they are not banned from working with children and young people. Advice and the application process can be found at: www.gov.uk/disclosure-barring-service-check/overview.



Giving the community a voice

It is a good idea to aim to involve the community in all stages of the project and to seek out the views and ideas of all sectors. Naturally, children should play a key role in this and have a right to be consulted on things that impact their lives under Article 12 of the UN Convention of the Child.

Play areas designed for children by adults are significantly different from those that children would design for themselves. Involving local children in the design stage is particularly important and there are many different ways to go about this, both informally through talking to children about their ideas to more formal consultation where written evidence is produced.

Visual evidence of children's thoughts and ideas can be invaluable to your development process whether it be written, drawn, filmed, recorded or collaged. Children's views are likely to be limited by their experience; it is therefore important to help provide inspiration through pictures or visits to other play spaces to enable children to make an informed decision. You may also need to adopt several different approaches to your consultation, ensuring that all ages and abilities are accounted for and not just those best able to express themselves. There are some great downloadable guides to aid you in this available at <http://www.childrensrights.wales/index.php/training-materials/blast-off-guides>

Raising awareness

The need to raise awareness of your wild play project is fairly obvious. If people do not know that the play space exists, no one will come to play. How to go about raising awareness, however, takes a little more thought, especially when considering two different primary target audiences: parents/carers as well as the children themselves. You will raise a certain amount of awareness of your project through your consultation programme, especially if you are working with local schools and community groups or hosting events. Additional avenues include local papers, community magazines/leaflets, leaflets in the local shops/amenities, social media (including Facebook and Twitter) and holding organised play events on site once it has opened.

Getting inspiration

Whilst the internet can provide you with a vast array of ideas for your wild play space, don't discount the value of going out to see similar play spaces in person. Find out what natural play provision is available locally and go on a visit to see what other people have done and what aspects might work for your project. Local country parks or the National Trust are often a good place to start. Visits can also help to provide children with the hands-on experience that they need to make an informed opinion.

Play England's 10 design principles

When designing your wild play site, you should aim to provide a play space that provides children with the opportunity to experience a wide variety of play experiences whilst also enabling them to form a connection with the natural environment.

Play England (2008) have developed 10 guiding principles to help you achieve this. They discuss that all play spaces should be:

1. Bespoke
2. Well located
3. Make use of natural elements
4. Provide a wide range of play experiences
5. Accessible to both disabled and non-disabled children
6. Meet community needs
7. Allow children of different ages to play together
8. Build in opportunities to experience risk and challenge
9. Sustainable and appropriately maintained
10. Allow for change and evolution



Design for play

Thinking about the space

Every wild play space is different and one of the major influencing factors will be the space available to you. The good news is that wild play spaces can exist in all shapes and sizes, but it is a good idea to think about the space and resources available to you when you are considering the design of the space.

You may be lucky enough to have part of an established woodland at your disposal, in which case you could think about how wild play might be encouraged within the wider site, outside of the boundaries of the play space itself. One idea is to introduce a wild play trail within the wider woodland, which can help to provide an even 'wilder' play experience (see case study: Holbury Manor). Alternatively, it may be that the space you have to use is a section of parkland and a bit of a blank canvas. Natural play elements can easily be introduced into a site with a little imagination and the other areas of the park can be used to your advantage such as providing a readymade audience to use your wild play site.

Boundaries

It is worth taking some time to consider how you are going to manage or mark the boundaries of your wild play space and if, in fact, you need to do so at all. Fencing off a play space can lead to an unwanted separation from the surrounding environment. There are, of course, some situations that require appropriate fencing such as where the play space is next to, or near, a road or car park that could otherwise introduce an unacceptable level of risk.

The use of soft edges for a play space, instead of fencing, helps to suggest a boundary to the area intended for play, without restricting children to that specific spot. Resources such as pathways and clever planting can all help to create this type of fuzzy edge to a wild play space.

Take a moment to think about maintenance

The ongoing maintenance of the site should be taken into consideration when putting together the design of the site. What resources will you have to maintain the site? Inevitably there will be demands on both time and money and the elements that you include within your design can have a significant influence on the level of future input that is required.



Health and safety

Taking on risks and challenges play an important role in the play and development of children. It is therefore important to recognise that the aim when designing a wild play space is not to remove all possible risks but to balance appropriate risk-taking with the associated benefits to child development and play.

The legal position

There is a legal duty placed on play space providers under the Health and Safety at Work Act (1974) to ensure that a 'suitable and sufficient assessment' of the risks attached to the play space of activity, and that this assessment is acted upon. The health and safety goal for wild play spaces therefore is not absolute safety, but to provide children with opportunities to test their abilities and develop them, whilst also protecting them from unacceptable risks. It is important to be aware that legally, it is the play providers and managers who are responsible for the risk management of the site and activities. Whilst external advice and expertise are valuable, it is the providers who have the final decision.

This toolkit is aimed at wild play spaces with low-key, natural resources such as those discussed in Section 2. However, if you choose to introduce more complex pieces of play equipment (such as those with moving parts) or with increased fall heights (such as encouraging tree climbing), there are

additional British and European standards that you need to be aware of. Play England's (2012) 'Managing Risk in Play Provision' is a good place to start your additional research.

There is also a duty under the Occupiers Liability Act 1984 to ensure that there is appropriate signage within a play area. Whilst there are several different functions that play space signs can fulfil, there are certain points that must be covered, including the operator of the site and contact details to report any damage or accidents. There are other aspects that should also be considered, such as ensuring wording does not suggest that the play space is safe for all children of a certain age and above, as this does not take into account the differing mental and physical capabilities of children that are of a similar age.

RoSPA (Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents)

RoSPA's play safety department provide advice and information on the safety of play areas, both indoors and outdoors. Depending on the composition of your wild play area and any equipment or resources that you decide to install, there is likely to be a need for an annual inspection by an independent body such as RoSPA.

RoSPA also offer a design checking and post-installation inspection service if you feel that your project would benefit from these.

www.rospace.com/play-safety/

Managing risk

Whilst risk assessments are commonplace in today's society, the management of risk in play differs in one crucial way to those within a workplace. Within play, the presence of risks are often beneficial to a child's development. Indeed, accidents and injuries within a play space are not necessarily indicative of a problem due to the value such experiences have to a child's learning. The Play Safety Forum (2014) suggests that play providers should focus on the significant risks present within the play space, those that

"...are capable of creating a real risk to health and safety which any reasonable person would appreciate and take steps to guard against."

Play Safety Forum (2014)

It was working from this standpoint that the Play Safety Forum introduced a more balanced approach to risk assessment within a play provision.



Risk-benefit analysis

A wild play space should seek to be a 'safe but not risk-free' environment. It is through taking on a suitable level of challenge and risk that children are able to test and develop their abilities, as well as learn to assess risks for themselves. Not all risks are positive. However, good risks are generally those that are engaging and beneficial to a child's growth, development and learning, whilst bad risks are those that are not easily predicted by the children and hold little or no value to their development.

Risk-benefit analysis provides play providers with a framework to consider the risks and benefits alongside one another, enabling both aspects to inform decision-making.

See Holbury Manor case study for a worked example.

Maintenance

Whilst you are likely to have considered maintenance from the start of your planning, it will be the risk assessment/risk-benefit analysis that has the greatest impact. You will be able to utilise outcomes from your risk-benefit analysis to help you draw up a monitoring and maintenance schedule. Often there are separate lists for weekly, monthly and yearly, depending on the level of check required. The checks and maintenance carried out on site should be clearly recorded and your records stored as they may be asked for if an accident were to occur.

By nature, resources within wild play sites tend to be low-key, steering away from more traditional play structures such as swings and slides. The provision of natural play resources should be decided upon due to their suitability for the site, their potential to inspire self-directed play and the needs and wishes of the community. The resources discussed within this toolkit focus on natural, low-key resources rather than more complex, fixed play features.



Section Two

Resources and Ideas



Children play in many different ways, depending on their individual interests and abilities. In fact, around 16 different play types have been identified, including creative, social, locomotive and fantasy play. Non-prescriptive play features, such as those discussed in this toolkit and generally found within wild play sites, put play in the control of the children themselves, providing them with some independence in how they experience the world around them.

Loose parts are materials within a play space that can be moved, carried, put together, lined up and taken apart. They have no set direction of use and, as such, inspire creativity within play. Within a natural environment, loose parts might include: logs, leaves, twigs, pebbles and soil.

Loose parts allow flexibility within children's play, as they can be used in whatever way a child's imagination directs them.

Whatever resources you choose to include within your wild play site, they should be able to be maintained in the long term. For some resources, this will mean monitoring and physical maintenance. For others, such as many loose parts, it is likely to require a topping-up of materials as they break down to ensure they are still available for use within play. Wherever possible, additional loose parts should be gathered from the same site as the wild play space to help ensure that new 'alien' species are not inadvertently introduced to the site. If this is not possible, great care should be taken to establish the suitability of the source and materials themselves.

The rest of this section is filled with ideas for resources that you may like to include in your wild play space.



Log circles

Log circles can serve many purposes within a wild play space, from simply providing a place to sit and socialise with their peers to an opportunity to balance and climb. Log circles can be a primary feature that draws children and their families into a wild play site, creating a point of focus within the area and, as such, are often one of the first resources that are considered.

Log circles can vary in both size and design so it is worth thinking early on how your site is likely to be used and by whom. If you think that it is likely that the site will be used by groups of children such as from schools or nurseries, then a large log circle can prove invaluable, providing not only a focus for activity but also a point to congregate and reflect.

Long logs can provide more flexible seating than short stumps, however, short stumps can provide a useful flat surface for other activities. It may, of course, depend on what is available to you and you could always consider mixing the two together. Both have potential for balancing and moving around the circle.

Loose parts – brash

Dead branches and leaves left on the ground hold many possibilities for imaginative play, not least for the construction of dens and nests. Ideally you will be able to make use of felled or coppiced material from elsewhere on site that can be left within the wild play area. If this is not a possibility for you, there may well be organisations and woodlands in your local area that are happy to help provide you with this type of material.

Brash will inevitably be being used and moved around by children, some of whom may be particularly young, so it is best to avoid anything that is too heavy. You should also be on the lookout for any particularly spiky or sharp edges and remove them. As time goes on and the wild play site gets used, the brash is likely to break down and will need ongoing replacement.



Fairy glades

The use of fairy glades within woodlands is an increasingly popular resource for imaginative play, particularly for younger children. Fairy glades can be as simple as a miniature door attached to the base of trees to more elaborate creations including pathways, gardens and even doors that open onto miniature staircases rising into the tree. Primarily utilised as sparks for the imagination, the potential use of fairy glades within wild play is limited only by the children's imaginations.

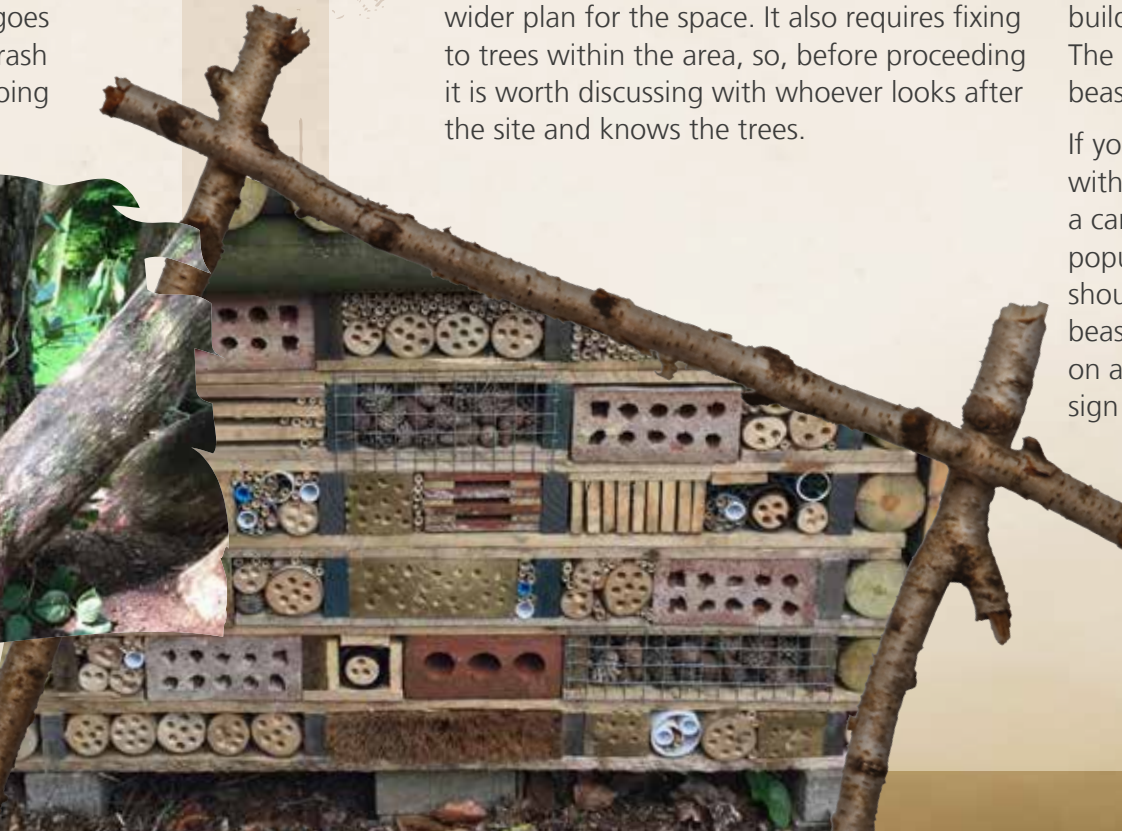
Fairy glades introduce a non-natural element to a wild play space, and whilst it is a low-key resource, this should be considered within the wider plan for the space. It also requires fixing to trees within the area, so, before proceeding it is worth discussing with whoever looks after the site and knows the trees.

Mini-beast hotel

Mini-beast hotels provide the opportunity for children to get up close and personal with some of nature's smaller creatures. Such encounters can not only spark curiosity but also help to engage children with nature and foster a wish to conserve it. If it is possible, get the children involved in the design and creation of the mini-beast hotel and you will have their interest from the very start!

Some people may consider a simple log pile to be a better option than a mini-beast hotel when it comes to providing opportunities for mini-beast hunting. Whilst they are a more natural resource, within a wild play space, piles of sticks are likely to disappear into den building and creative material before too long. The more structured appearance of a mini-beast hotel helps prevent this from occurring.

If you choose to include a mini-beast hotel within your wild play site, it is best to keep a careful eye on the associated mini-beast population. If it is noted to be declining, you should consider introducing a second mini-beast hotel into the site which could be used on a rotating basis, marking one off with a sign such as 'Shhh...mini-beasts sleeping.'



Living willow

If your site is more open than some wooded areas, you may wish to consider the use of living willow. Willow can be used to create a wide variety of potential play features, including tunnels, domes and even chairs!

Willow can be a great way of introducing natural play elements into an area that is a bit of a blank canvas. The introduction of height into the area will immediately catch people's interest.

Creating living willow structures is a bit of an art and you may wish to get an expert in to create it for you, or why not ask them to run a session with community members and their children to create it together? The willow will need some upkeep as it grows, weaving in some of the new growth and trimming off bits where they are not wanted. Once it is established, re-weaving and harvesting the willow is a great opportunity for a community event. The harvested willow could be used for craft activities with local children, or even help provide you with pieces of brash to top up your loose parts!

When considering introducing living willow into your site, always check with the landowner to see if there are any pipes running under the ground. If there are, you should avoid planting over them as within two or three years the willow's roots may have penetrated the pipes.

Dead and lying logs

Dead and lying trees that have fallen to the ground can provide a dramatic inclusion within a wild play site. Children often do not need much encouragement to explore a fallen tree and within minutes are likely to be clambering all over it. Give it time and the tree may well become so much more: a castle, a base or even a dragon's home. Providing non-specific play features such as this opens up children's play beyond what the original plan may have intended.

Fallen trees tend to be extremely heavy and cumbersome, unless you are lucky enough already to have something on site that you can utilise. You will need to consider how you are going to source, transport and install such a large item. If this proves to be too difficult or costly, why not consider using several smaller individual logs? With careful placement, these too can provide numerous opportunities for balancing, climbing and all the other things that children imagine.

Loose parts – leaves, etc

Loose parts are a vital element of children's self-directed play; these are moveable features within the play area that can be utilised for a variety of tasks. Within a wild play site, loose parts are likely to include, but not limited to, leaves, twigs, pine cones and stones. These are particularly useful for creative play, such as making pictures and sculptures on the ground.

If it is likely that your site will get heavy usage, smaller loose parts such as leaves and pine cones may break down quicker than you would expect. If you are fortunate to have a larger site, beyond the wild play area, you may be able to transfer some loose parts when they need a top-up. Be conscious, however, that dead woodland material is an important part of the ecosystem, so try not to strip an area bare!

Tree stumps

Tree stumps hold many different potential play opportunities, not least that of a natural climbing frame. Having a variety of heights and width of stumps can introduce challenge to a variety of ages. A small height off the ground may seem easy for some older children, but can be a great challenge for young children with little feet!

Tree stumps can be heavy and you should take care to ensure that they are as flat and stable as possible on the ground to prevent them from tipping over or rolling away. Stability when placed on the ground is also important, as it is likely that they will get climbed over and some younger children may not yet have developed a solid sense of balance. You may be lucky enough to already have some tree stumps on site where trees have previously been felled. The siting of such stumps may well influence the positioning of any introduced stumps.



Signs

Signs can achieve a number of functions, not least in letting people know that there is a wild play site and that children are encouraged to use it. They can also be useful to provide information regarding who to contact if there are any issues or problems, or if people would like to get involved and help out on the project. It may be that you want to make use of signage to help provide some inspiration for play itself.

Think carefully about the purpose of the sign and who the audience is likely to be. A sign designed to encourage children to make use of the site for wild play, is likely to be very different to one targeting adults, (setting out rules, discouraging dog walking, etc). It may be that you need one sign to fulfil both functions, in which case you may need to be creative in your composition.

Signs don't have to be permanent, temporary or changeable. Signs can be really effective if they are regularly updated and not left to become outdated. Temporary signs can be a good way to promote upcoming events or provide inspiration for wild play.

Benches

Younger children are most likely to be accompanied to a wild play site by their parent or carers and, as such, we need to take them into account as well. If a parent/carer is happy and comfortable, they are more likely to allow their child/children to stay and play for a longer period of time. The provision of benches at the wild play site will enable adults to sit fairly comfortably and watch their children play. Think carefully about the type of benches used. It is likely that low-key, naturalistic-designed benches will fit better into the feel of a wild play site than plastic or metal benches.

Where you locate benches intended for adult use has the potential to impact the level of opportunity for free play by children. Parents of young children will understandably want to be close enough to see their children and what they are doing, but it is important that they do not impinge too far into the children's play space. Equally, you do not want the benches to be inaccessible to children who may wish to include their parents within their play. Think about using space around the edges of the site that has a clear view of the area.



Section Three Activities



Activities

The very best resources for wild play are time spent in a natural space and a child's imagination. For some families, however, wild play is unfamiliar territory. Providing ideas of activities which can get children and parents started on their own wild play journey can help to increase their confidence in an unfamiliar environment. Activities such as those discussed in this toolkit are designed to be stepping stones to help bridge the way to children's own, independent, self-directed play.

Promoting wild play activities

There are numerous ways of promoting wild play ideas to your community, one of which is by holding wild play events at your play space. Events provide the opportunity for people involved in the wild play project to lead activities, enabling families to experience wild play first-hand and to take away ideas that they can replicate on their own on future visits to the site.

Another great way to get your message out there is by using social media, such as Facebook and Twitter. Why not set up a page for your project and use it to keep the community updated on progress, as well as to promote events and provide information on specific activities?

Build a den

Den building is an ever-popular activity with children and young people. Use the loose brush around the forest floor to construct a den against one of the trees in the forest. Try to make it as solid and weather-proof as you can (tepees are a popular design). If it is warm, why not test out how waterproof your final den is by pouring water over it! You could even add special design features such as an entrance path and seating area.

When constructing dens, it is important to ensure that they do not become too top-heavy or unstable and likely to fall in on you. A major influence on this will be size, both of materials that are used and of the den itself. Try to encourage appropriate-sized dens by providing materials that are not too big or heavy, and removing any large or unstable shelters that are built. It is also important not to pick anything living when constructing a shelter. Within the New Forest this is especially true for bracken, which may be concealing ticks and can cut hands.



Natural portraits

Natural portraits are a great, creative activity that can be done either individually or in groups. First lie down on the forest floor and ask one of your friends or family to mark your silhouette with twigs and sticks. Once they are finished, carefully stand up and you should have an outline of a person...you! Now all you need to do is collect items from around the forest to 'colour' it in.

Variation: Instead of portraits of your family and friends, why not create the outline of an animal that lives in the New Forest and create an animal portrait instead?

As with all wild play activities, remember that it is important to only use items that are already dead and on the forest floor and not to pick or use materials that are still living. This helps to ensure that our habitats stay as balanced and healthy as possible. Whenever you are collecting materials within a natural environment, you should always be conscious that there could be litter or debris on the ground which you don't want small hands collecting!

Mini-beast hunt

Search high and low, under logs, in the bushes, even in the air. You will be amazed what mini-beasts you can find once your eyes are tuned in. You do not need to have any equipment for a fantastic mini-beast hunt, but if you have access to a magnifying glass, bug pot or identification guide, why not take them along to help you get a closer look? If you find a creature and you are not sure what it is, maybe take a photo and look it up on the internet when you get back home.

When looking for mini-beasts make sure you handle them with great care and always return them to where they were discovered. If you move any logs or rocks, remember to replace the mini-beasts homes to how you found them.

Nature's rainbows

Nature is full of green and browns, right? Why not have another look and see how many different colours you can find in nature? Paint colour sample strips from DIY shops can help to get little eyes focused on all the possible different colours around. You could take photographs of the colours that you find, or lay out those that are already dead on the forest floor (so you don't need to pick anything) to create your own nature's rainbow. If you are feeling inspired, you could have a look at some of the artwork created by artists who use natural materials, such as Andy Goldsworthy and then have a go yourself.



Variation: Autumn is a great season for finding different colours. During other seasons when there might be less variety, why not concentrate on how many different shades of green or brown you can find instead?

Meet a tree

Guide your friend or child to a tree with their eyes closed or wearing a blindfold. Let them really get to know the tree using their senses of touch and smell. Once they have had a good explore, lead them away from their tree and see if they can find it again once their vision has been restored. Why not come back and visit the tree again and see how it changes through the seasons? You could also take bark rubbing from the trunk or record what animals you can see in or around the tree.

When guiding someone to a tree, remember that they cannot see and therefore will not be aware of any bumps in the ground or logs that they might trip over. Take care and warn them of anything that is coming up. If you place their hands on your shoulders and have them walk behind you, they should also feel you step over anything on the ground.

Feely boxes

Using an old egg carton as a collection box, collect items that feel opposite to each other, such as 'ticky and prickly', 'rough and smooth' or 'soft and hard'. Once you have collected three of each, see if your family or friends can guess what you were collecting. The skin on the inside of your wrist is particularly sensitive and is a good place to really feel the textures of your items. Remember, only collect items that are dead or on the forest floor (don't pick anything that is living) and that you need to return all your items to the forest floor when you are finished.

Variation: You can still use this activity even if you don't have access to old egg boxes. Decide on your pair of describing words then collect items into two piles before asking people to guess what they were.



Micro-hikes, an ant's-eye view

Imagine that you are an ant on the ground. How would they see the world around them? Choose an area and mark out an interesting trail through landmarks (you could use twigs and string, or attach leaves on twigs to become flags). Puddles could become great lakes and weeds and plants can become huge forests; you are only limited by your imagination. Get down on your hands and knees and start looking...

Once you have marked out your trail, why not take your friends and family on a guided tour?

Sculptures and pictures

You can use nature as your inspiration to create sculptures and pictures out of natural materials. First, find a clear patch of ground, decide on your design then start collecting materials from the forest floor. As always, remember when collecting materials to use dead material and nothing that is living. If you are making a sculpture, remember that it should be three-dimensional. Think about how you might be able to make it stand up from the ground.

Camouflage (hide-and-seek with a twist)

This is a great game if you want to keep everyone within a fairly limited area. It works like traditional hide-and-seek in that there is one seeker and the rest of the group will go and hide. Agree something central for a base such as a tree (if there is nothing obvious, why not put a jumper on the ground?). The seeker must stay in contact with the base at all times during the game. So, for instance, they would be able to move around a tree as long as they were touching it, but would not be able to move away from the tree completely.

The seeker starts the game by closing their eyes and counting to 30 (or an agreed number appropriate to the group). During this time, the rest of the group must find a hiding space, preferably fairly close to the seeker. Once the seeker has finished their count, they can have a look around to see if they can spot anyone,



calling them out with their hiding position when they do.

The seeker has three tools to help them find the hiders. Firstly they can ask the hiders how many fingers are being held up. The hiders may have to poke their head out of their hiding spot for a minute. While the hiders are calling out the number of fingers, the seeker has a chance to spot the hiders.

Secondly, the seeker can call out 'animal noises' at which point all hiders must loudly make an animal noise such as a monkey, dog or wolf. These noises may give the seeker some clues about where to look! After this, the seeker can then close their eyes and call out 'tag me in 30' and proceed to count aloud to 30. During this count, every hider must come out of their hiding spot, tag the seeker and quickly find a hiding spot. Once the seeker has reached 30, they can open their eyes.

Once these three options have been used, the seeker can go through them all again. When

they get to 'tag me', it can be reduced to 20 and then 10. The last hider to be in the game is the seeker for the next round.

Whether you play camouflage or another version of hide-and-seek, it is always worth firstly setting some ground rules. Some areas to think about are:

Boundaries – Agree with the group a set area for play, away from hazards such as lakes or streams.

Heights – Have a discussion about where hiding spaces should be.

Ending the game – It is always worth agreeing a phrase that signals the end of a game, even if all of the hiders have not been found. Some children can be very good at squeezing themselves into small spaces that make them very hard to find!

Age appropriateness – Depending on the age/ability mix within the group, you may benefit from making a few adjustments. Examples: if you have a slow counter or if you have particularly young children who may need to hide with an adult or more experienced hider.

Section Four Case Study – Holbury Manor wild play site



Background

Holbury Manor wild play site is located in a section of woodland, within a much larger ten hectare of parkland. Holbury Manor is a Site of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINC) and is owned and managed by Fawley Parish Council. Set inside the boundaries of the New Forest National Park and on the doorstep of the local Holbury community, we felt that Holbury Manor was an ideal venue for our first wild play site.

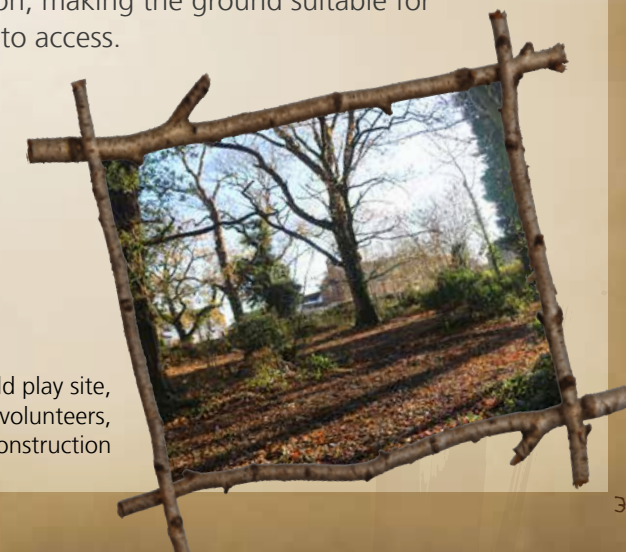
Fawley Parish Council were extremely supportive of the project from the outset. In addition to the wild play project, they have also worked in partnership with the New Forest National Park Authority on another woodland conservation project also set within the Holbury Manor park. As part of this second woodland conservation project, a ten-year Forestry Commission approved management plan was put in place to help create a more diverse habitat and improve access for local people.

In addition to the funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund, we secured some additional funding from the National Grid Landscape Enhancement Initiative. This enabled us to extend our plans to a second phase which will include a wild play loop within the wider woodlands. This will increase play opportunities to the local community, as well as improvements to footpaths, fencing and the main car park.

Wild play site

The first stage of work for the Holbury Manor site was to look at safety and risk, taking into account both potential users of the site as well as any wildlife living within the woodlands. A tree safety survey was conducted which brought to light some work that was required on several trees within the boundaries of the wild play site. We also commissioned a bat survey, to ensure that no roosting sites would be disturbed during the work required to the trees. During this initial phase, a bees' nest was discovered on site which was safely relocated so that the bees would not be disturbed and the risk of stings to children using the site was reduced.

In addition to the work carried out on the trees, the woodland floor was a dense blanket of brambles and ferns concealing a vast amount of abandoned rubbish and smashed glass which had accumulated over the years. An amazing band of volunteers worked hard to clear the site of all this rubbish and vegetation, making the ground suitable for children to access.



Holbury Manor wild play site,
having been cleared by volunteers,
before construction

The brief for the wild play site at Holbury Manor was 'low-key, blending in with the surrounding woodlands' however, we needed some inspiration as to what this would actually look like. Having consulted with local children about what they would like to see in their wild play site and after lots of online research and visits to different sites, it was a visit to a natural play area within Kew Gardens, that helped to inform our final plan.

Whilst visiting Kew Gardens, time was spent talking to families using the play area and taking lots of photographs and videos of the play elements, including close-ups of the finish and joinery. Kew gardens themselves provided us with support and guidance on how to achieve the natural clamber area and were delighted to have inspired us to adopt their ideas. Our plans were finalised through discussions with other organisations such as the Forestry Commission, Moors Valley Country Park, local building companies and a playground design business.

"We wanted to engage the local community, encourage them to enjoy, play and interact with nature which is on their doorstep. This was ideal as it blended into the surroundings and was open to all to use."

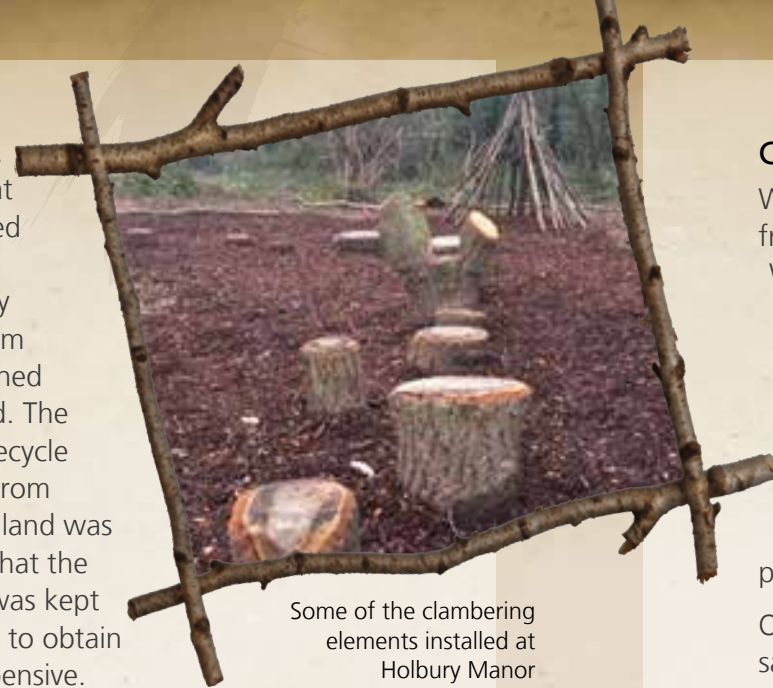
Clerk, Fawley Parish Council

A local arboriculture contractor completed the tree safety work on site as well as helping with the construction of some of the elements within the play space. We showed them the photographs and videos that had been taken

at Kew Gardens. Using timber that they had removed as part of their safety work, they manoeuvred them together and joined them as required. The opportunity to recycle timber sourced from within the woodland was a major reason that the cost of the site was kept relatively low, as to obtain hardwood is expensive.

In order to maximise the life of the timber we had been advised that when burying logs into the ground, they should be placed on shingle drainage and supported in place by compacted earth. Rough edges and any protruding parts also needed to be removed and smoothed off. All of this work was completed by volunteers and Fawley Parish Council staff working together, giving their time and energy to the project.

Once the wild play elements had been completed, the site underwent and passed an independent safety inspection before the site was opened up for public use. During this phase, Fawley Parish Council staff completed training in outdoor playground inspections, which meant that they are able to take on the regular inspections and maintenance of the wild play site in-house.



Some of the clambering elements installed at Holbury Manor



Community engagement

We sought to engage the local community from the very first stages of the project. Whilst the initial safety work was being completed, three local primary schools were visited and local children provided their thoughts and ideas about the wild play site and what it could look like. We also used these links with local primary schools to talk to parents about their views on wild play and what they would like to see provided within site.

Once the site had passed the independent safety inspection, a pop-up opening event was held, and the local community invited to join us and take part in wild play activities. The event was held over the Easter holidays and attended by approximately 100 people from the local community, despite very wet conditions! A bit of mud certainly never stopped wild play!

Throughout community engagement work, we were on the lookout for potential volunteers from within the local community who could get involved in the project, future events and take on an ownership of the site in the future. Once we had collected together a group of individuals, we held an ideas meeting to see how we should progress with future events and resources for the wild play site.

Lessons learnt

Two key lessons emerged from the development of the wild play site at Holbury Manor.

1. Effective partnership working can make an enormous difference to a project such as a wild play site. Positive communications between the New Forest National Park Authority and Fawley Parish Council, along with a supportive flexibility on both sides meant that when obstacles and delays were encountered, they were overcome with minimal stress and disruption.
2. Delays to a project such as this are almost inevitable and being prepared for them and able to accept them as part of the project can help to minimise frustrations. Again, this links back to having open and honest communication with your project partners. In the case of Holbury Manor, the timings of the project meant that delays were encountered whilst waiting for the woodland works to be completed; this could only be done outside of the bird nesting season. Delay was also introduced whilst we were applying for additional funding for the project. To minimise this additional delay, we decided to approach the project in two stages, with the wild play loop and additional works being completed once the main site was up and running.

Risk-Benefit Assessment: Holbury Manor Wild Play Site

Project/proposal name	Holbury Manor Wild Play Site		
Type of Assessment (tick one box)	Designer		
	Provider/manager		
	Post-installation	*	
	Monitoring		
Assessor	Name	Claire Pearce	
	Position	Wild Play Project Officer	
	Date	1st April 2018	
Description and location of facility, feature, activity or equipment	Holbury Manor wild play site is located within the boundaries of the New Forest National Park, on the edge of the Holbury community. It is an open-access site within a larger wooded parkland. The site contains natural play features including a balancing/log-stepping course and den-building materials. There is natural, log seating provided within site.		
Date to review risk-benefit assessment	1st April 2019, unless additional information is brought to light.		
Signature of senior worker/manager			
Benefits	Benefits to the physical and mental health of children taking part in regular wild play, positives impacts also on child development and social inclusion. Increased personal connection to nature and desire to protect it.		
Risks (taking into account any information identified in the supplementary form)	Slips, trips and falls (surfaces of log balance and steps to be monitored for slipperiness and action taken if required); accessing road from wild play site (broad boundary of vegetaion to be maintained and fence to be constructed when funding is available); dogs: infection with toxocara canines (dog roundworm) from dog faeces, being bitten (dogs on site to be monitored and signs and fencing introduced if required); falling branches and trees (tree safety work completed); hazardous waste (site to be monitored regularly); insect bites, ticks and poisonous fungi (awarness to be raised with public during pop-up events).		
Local factors	The wild play site is situated within a larger site which is popular for dog walking. There is a road running adjacent to the play site, currently separated with broad scrub.		
Precedents and/or comparisons	Advice has been sought from sites with similar play installations, including Kew Gardens, Richmond and Moors Valley Country Park, Dorset. This included information on appropriate installation of balancing and stepping logs.		
Decisions	Provide additional log steps as and when appropriate logs become available within site to reduce gaps over 500mm. Monitor dogs accessing play site. Install a fence alongside the road once additional funding becomes available. Balancing and stepping logs to be situated to minimise canopy coverage to reduce level of moss, etc., building up.		
Actions taken	Tree safety work completed on-site and bee nest relocated away from site.		
Ongoing management and monitoring	Weekly and quarterly check to be conducted by Fawley Parish Council staff, who have undergone appropriate play safety inspection training. They are also in a position to provide as much in-house management as is appropriate or arrange external contractors as required. Annual safety inspections will be carried out by an independant body, as recomended by ROSPA.		

Supplementary form: Knowledge and/or specialist expertise needed (if any) for this risk-benefit assessment

Knowledge and/or specialism	Person providing the knowledge/ carrying out the assessment	Any checks carried out and actions proposed
Tree safety and aboriculture	Aboritree Ltd	Removal of dead/unsafe branches and/ or trees from within the wild play site boundaries
Post-installation safety inspection	Day Play Inspections Ltd	Post-installation safety inspection - see attached post-installation report
Bat survey	Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust	Checks for bat roosts within site boundaries prior to tree safety works being carried out. No roosts were found.
Bee ecology and nest relocation	Smith Bee Keepers	Bee nest located within boundaries of wild play sites. Nest was carefully relocated to avoid disturbance to bees and risk of stings to children playing within site.
Construction of bespoke, natural balancing/clamber structures	Kew Gardens, Richmond	Significant advice on design, construction, maintenance, ground surfacing and overall ethos of play site provided.
Construction of bespoke, natural balancing/clamber structures	Forestry Commission	Advice provided on maintenance of structures and anti-slip methods on timber.



Local visitors at the pop-up event during Easter 2018

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NPA 00750, September 2018

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